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ABSTRACT

Paraeducators are being used in inclusive classrooms to support special education students. Supervision and management of paraeducators was once the responsibility of the special educator working with the paraeducator. However, teacher shortages in rural schools result in paraeducators spending most of their time in general education classrooms. Paraeducators are required by special education law to be supervised and managed, and supervision implies more direct control than management. Rural education has the lead in the use of paraeducators, and the following specific suggestions for paraeducator management are drawn from the rural experience: one certified staff or administrator should be assigned as the official manager; parameters should be set for the paraeducator's responsibilities to ensure that the paraeducator does not perform tasks or take on responsibilities that belong to certified staff; duties and specific tasks of paraeducators should be defined and assigned in writing; general education teachers should be empowered by explaining their role as immediate supervisor and by assigning them specific management tasks; paraeducators should be monitored and provided constructive feedback on their performance; collaborative meetings with paraeducators should be held regularly, although finding time for such meetings may require creativity; and the roles and task assignments of paraeducators should be considered in student planning. (Contains 15 references.) (TD)

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MANAGING PARAEDUCATORS IN RURAL INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

The title of this presentation may lead one to think of a very specific, narrowly focused discussion. In actuality, the information of this presentation could fit a wide variety of audiences and situations. A simple change of words would allow the information to fit any number of situations. For example, the word "paraeducator" could be replaced with:

- Paraprofessional
- Instructional aide
- Classroom aide
- Teacher aide
- Therapy aide
- Therapy assistant
- Instructional assistant
- Instructional support aide
- Teacher assistant
- Instructional assistant
- Assistant
- Educational technician
- Job coach
- Shadow
- Para
- Parapro

Paraeducators are known by many titles (French, 1998; Mueller, 1995; Pickett, Faison, and Formanek, 1999), but their overall role is the same - to provide support and assistance to teachers and therapists in providing quality and individualized instruction for children with disabilities in today's schools and other educational and service sites (Palma, 1994).

"Rural" could be replaced with suburban or urban. The employment of paraeducators is increasing across the country and is expected to grow faster than the average for all occupations through the year 2008 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2000).

Paraeducators are being used in inclusive classrooms to support the placement of students with special needs in general education classes and curriculum (Lamont and Hill, 1991; Vergun and Chambers, 1995). This is a relatively new development, when one considers the history of paraeducator use. Paraeducators in special education began providing support in clinical and restrictive settings, such as hospitals, special day schools and self-contained classrooms during the 1950s and 60s (Pickett and Gerlach, 1997). As special education services have grown toward less restrictive placements, paraeducators have been used to support those placements, as well. Since paraeducators now provide support in a wide range of placements, the term "inclusive" in the title could be replaced with any of the following placement descriptions.

- Resource
- Self-contained
- Alternative
- Special school
- Homebound
- Hospital

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Finally, the term "classroom" is also interchangeable. Paraeducators are providing support and services to students in a wide variety of educational and community settings, not just classrooms (Dover, 2000). We could replace "classrooms with:

- Hallways
- Lunchrooms
- Workrooms
- Front/back of school
- Bus lines
- Buses
- Community settings
- Job sites

So, once again, why did I choose the words that I did for this presentation's title? First, they best fit the audience and the focus of the conference. Secondly, I believe that the management of paraeducators in inclusive rural classrooms presents the greatest of all challenges. Supervision and management used to be the responsibility of the special educator working along side of the paraeducator (Blessing, 1967, Boomer, 1980, Greer, 1979). Inclusive placements could be considered "remote" (Likins and Morgan, 1999) and paraeducators spend most their time apart from special education teachers in general education classrooms (Snell and Janney, 2000). Supervision and management by "remote control" certainly adds challenges.

Who knows "remote" better than rural special education? It's part of the charm of rural special education. The history of paraeducator use, less frequent student and general education teacher contact by certified teachers and therapists, students with special needs working within the general education classroom, and teacher shortages are characteristics of rural special education. Paraeducators have been indispensable to rural special education programs and effective program delivery – insuring that no child is left behind. I believe rural education can provide guidance in the current issues of paraeducator supervision and management.

Actually, the use and management of paraeducators in ANY setting involves many of the same basic issues. Three of those basic issues include identifying who paraeducators are, what they do and why management and supervision is so important. The research of Nancy French at the University of Colorado in Denver provides a generalized profile of a typical paraeducator of any area – rural, urban and suburban. Paraeducators:

- Are usually women
- Have little to no specific training as a paraeducator
- Are, on the average, 40 years old
- Are paid on an hourly basis
- Live in the school's neighborhood
- Are racially, culturally, & linguistically similar to the school's student population
- Started careers as paraeducators while raising their own children
- Are satisfied with their jobs
- Are proud of what they do
- Vary in qualities of experience, education level, training, and knowledge of special education

Generally, paraeducators serve as supports to or as extensions of certified staff responsible for programs and students. They support the needs and the achievements of students. Specifically, they perform tasks and everyday duties associated with their general support role.

I've asked paraeducators what they do. A sample of the responses I've received include:

- Reading aloud to students
- Monitoring student behaviors
- Making flashcards
- Checking papers
- Taking attendance
- Cleaning out and organizing notebooks with students
- Listening to students read aloud

- Taking a students on a "cool down" walk
- Watering the plants in the classroom
- Feeding a student who cannot feed herself
- Helping a student learn "the ropes" on his community job site

Paraeducators need supervision and management because, quite simply, it's the law. The special education law (IDEA-97) specifies that states may allow paraeducators and assistants who are appropriately trained and supervised can assist in providing special education and related services to students with disabilities ("Give Paraeducator Tools", 2000). Providing supervision and management is also ethical.

If we truly want no child left behind, we have to support the paraeducators through appropriate supervision and management. Rural education has the lead in the use of paraeducators, in my opinion, and should provide the lead in the management of paraeducators, where other may be merely "supervising".

When asked, 300 paraeducators in Olathe, Kansas and 150 in Dodge City, Kansas told me they would rather be "managed" than "supervised". The choice of "management" was deliberate in the title of this presentation. Those paraeducators in Kansas convinced me that the difference was important to the relationship between paraeducators and the teachers and therapists working with them. Other words for "supervise" are:

- Oversee
- Control
- Watch over
- Keep an eye on
- Run
- Order
- Govern
- Be in command of
- Rule

Other words for "manage" are:

- Handle
- Direct
- Show the way
- Guide
- Lead
- Put on the right track
- Point in the right direction
- Steer
- Channel
- Funnel
- Pilot

Subtle difference may exist between the words, but a world of difference may exist in the perceptions of the paraeducators. With that thought in mind, let's now look at some specific suggestions and tools to aid in the effective management of paraeducators in rural inclusive classrooms.

Assign one certified staff or administrator as the official manager. Inclusive settings pose the problem of multiple "bosses" for paraeducators (Dover, 1996). With the number of possible instructional and supervisory environments in which paraeducators may find themselves, they will also have to report to or take direction from a group of "bosses". Those "bosses" could be general education teachers, special program teachers, related service staff, administrators, coordinators, lunchroom supervisors, and bus drivers. The greater the number of "bosses", the greater the number of rules, regulations, communication styles, instructional styles, personalities, quirks, personal likes/dislikes, and classroom and area expectations. Each "boss" should be considered an immediate manager – providing support and direction when working directly with the paraeducator. Having numerous immediate managers can be overwhelming, confusing, and even, frustrating at times. One official

manager, usually a special educator, can provide consistent support to the paraeducator and all the immediate managers. Duties of an official manager include:

- General orientation
- Development or revision of schedules
- Providing the names of target students
- Access to help target student information regarding present level of performance, modifications and needs
- General or overall job tasks, roles and responsibilities ("marching orders")
- Approving or developing in-service programs and training
- Ongoing support
- Evaluation of job performance

The duties of an immediate supervisor include:

- Specific orientation to classroom rules, expectations, and procedures
- Specific times which support from the paraeducator is needed
- Identification of non-identified students who may need extra support
- Providing information about subject, curriculum, classroom procedures, instruction & access to materials
- Defining specific job tasks as related to student & instructional activities or classroom needs
- Suggesting areas of needed skill development for the paraeducator
- Providing "on the job" skill training
- Providing feedback on task performance

If the paraeducator does not serve multiple settings or teachers/therapists, but works with only one, that one teacher or therapist is most likely to take on the duties of both the official and immediate supervisor.

Set perimeters for the paraeducator's role and responsibilities. Part of management responsibilities is to ensure the paraeducator does not perform tasks or take on responsibilities that belong to certified staff. Fewer than half of the individual state departments of education had standard or guidelines for the employment, roles and duties, placement, supervision and training of paraeducators ("Standards, Guidelines Not Available", 2000). Ethical practices, as well as legal guidelines in a few states, indicate paraeducators may:

- Be left alone in the classroom in a planned way
- Work with students out of the direct supervision, but under the indirect supervision of a certified teacher or therapist
- Work with student on concepts or skills introduced by a teacher or therapist
- Have specific instructional or management responsibilities with students
- Be involved with student meetings
- Be used to support inclusive placements

Paraeducators should not:

- Be used in place of a certified teacher or therapist
- Introduce completely new concepts or skills to students
- Be given primary responsibility for students with special needs
- Participate in meetings in place of a teacher or therapist
- Be given primary responsibility for the inclusion of one or more students

Perimeters for modifications require special consideration. Paraeducators can make instructional modifications, but should only assist with the construction and the implementation of curricular modifications. Defining curricular modifications is the responsibility of certified staff and student planning teams.

Define duties and assign specific tasks to paraeducators. Key to planning for effective paraeducator management is assigning specific tasks and communicating those expectations. Assigned duties and tasks should be communicated in writing and related to the individual and group instructional needs of target students. Several planning and record sheets are provided.

Empower general education teachers by explaining their role as immediate supervisor and assigning specific management tasks. It is also important that the questions and concerns of general education teachers be considered and addressed. They may have general questions about the assignment of a paraeducator to their classroom. Explain the duties they are expected to perform, as well as those performed by the official supervisor, and finally, those duties you will both perform or on which you will collaborate. Provide basic and useful suggestions and information regarding the management of paraeducators. Examples of management tasks performed or shared by general education teachers include:

- Introducing the paraeducator to the class
- Providing information about the general curriculum
- Providing books, worksheets and instructional materials
- Providing lesson plans, or at least unit topics and lesson topics
- Providing on-the-job training
- Correcting inaccurate instruction by the paraeducator
- Regulating the level of help a paraeducator provides to a student
- Dealing with problems and concerns

Monitor paraeducator performance of duties and provide constructive feedback. Part of ongoing communication with paraeducators involves watching what paraeducators do, listening to what they say and providing feedback that increase paraeducator performance. The Paraeducator Duty Feedback Checklist is provided as a tool to monitor paraeducator performance on instructional tasks including responding to student needs, rapport with students, enforcement of school, classroom rules & routines, is punctual and/or has consistent attendance and fosters student independence. General education teachers, special educators and paraeducators, can use this communication tool themselves.

Meet with paraeducators regularly. One of the most important factors in successful inclusive programs is collaboration time. One of the greatest barriers to successful collaboration is finding the time. A little collaborative time goes a long way if procedures are used, such as the use of an agenda. An agenda is especially useful if you need to meet with more than one paraeducator. Make a commitment to carving out 5 to 10 minutes either during student instructional time (such as independent seat work or group activity time) or away from student instructional time. Remember, often paraeducators come when the students come and may not receive pay for time before or after school. Get creative finding time together. It is amazing what a difference even a few minutes of collaborative time can make.

Consider the roles and task assignments of paraeducators during student planning. As IEP teams, collaborative planning teams and even individual teachers develop individual student programs or plan classroom instruction, plan for paraeducator involvement with students. This allows a proactive approach to both student instruction and paraeducator support.

Rural teachers and therapists may have more experience in dealing with challenging issues in the delivery of special education services. Managing and supervising the instructional support of paraeducators is now part of the job.

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